

No limits

For those who trade online, crossing physical and cultural barriers is essential: it means finding a way to share our Italian traditions and heritage with the world without sacrificing our identity. Leonardo Da Vinci got the essence of it.

For me, boundaries are a mysterious concept. Not setting boundaries has always been part of my DNA. Consequently, it has become part of my business, whose mission is to operate globally, using technology to break through cultural frontiers and geographical borders. To give you one example, sometimes Italian companies expanding abroad put Italian managers in charge at their subsidiaries. But we at YNAP think that's a cultural mistake. Experience and history teach us that you need to understand the culture where you are working, not only trusting in diversity but investing in it. That is why, during the recruitment process, we look for a mix of nationalities. It might resemble the popular old joke about an Italian, an Englishman and a German, but that really is the best way to break down barriers – in this case Italian business culture – and pave the way to a truly global approach.

As another example, YOOX entered China in 2010, before any other fashion e-tailer. In doing so, we generated a "to do list" of 101 things, each one stemming from the differences between the two cultures. We have dealt with all of them, thanks to our working environment and rooted in diversity. I believe that diversity is what makes the difference; it has always shifted parameters – as far back as the first barriers we know about, built by the Romans.

In ancient Roman culture, the limes (boundary markers) were the edge of the unknown – a shield against the danger and the end of civilisation. At the same time, the limes (boundary markers) also symbolised the opposite: a thin line of communication with unknown lands and the opportunity to understand cultures that did not speak the language of Rome – a two-way street.

. Throughout history, both science and religion have addressed this personal, rather than practical, need to overcome one's own 'Pillars of Hercules' – the laws that bind the soul rather than the body. That is what the DNA of humans is actually made of, humans who began to develop over a million years ago by expanding personal boundaries before geographical ones. We have never stopped expanding our personal frontiers.

This is also the philosophy behind my entire professional and personal adventure. I really wanted to be an entrepreneur. The kind of entrepreneur that was not just someone who built companies, but someone who pushed boundaries; creating value by sharing knowledge and overcoming stereotypes. Many years on, I remain committed to that. An entrepreneur is, above all, someone who breaks down barriers, who brings together apparently opposing worlds. We do so with a lingua franca (free language), which used to be Latin and today is the Internet.

Way back in 1999 – before Wikipedia, Facebook and the iPhone – this hunch led me to create YOOX, an idea that was cultural before it was technological. I wanted to break down the barriers between the internet and fashion: two worlds that everyone thought could not be bridged because they had never communicated with one another before

The Internet is the most powerful means ever invented to overcome boundaries. Before the Internet, the Earth was enormous, closed off, divided into unknown and often incomprehensible cultures. The Internet has forever changed human life because it has eliminated space and time – the two fundamental boundaries that have defined humans for millennia.

I like to think that this move towards a universal language is down to an Italian – one of the greatest minds in human history. In his 'Codex Atlanticus' (a twelve-volume, bound set of drawings and writings), Leonardo da Vinci wrote: "Men of the most distant countries shall speak to one another and shall respond and talk and touch and embrace from one hemisphere to the other, and they shall understand each other's languages." Leonardo was the first to imagine a single, simple language for future ages. Exactly like the Internet.

Reflecting on Leonardo's role in the origin of the Internet also led me to consider another aspect, which has much to do with technology and barriers. Leonardo was born and lived in Vinci but, from a young age, frequently travelled to Florence, pushing back his personal boundaries. Pushing his personal boundaries lead him to Milan, France, and many other places throughout his life.

I have always wondered what Leonardo thought about as he was travelling back and forth through Tuscany. What he saw, and how he felt. Then one day, walking in Silicon Valley, I found the answer. Although the setting and level of beauty is incomparable, back then in Tuscany Leonardo saw what we see today in California: an active ruling class, financial and cultural resources, and a lingua franca that breaks down barriers and brings together different approaches, cultures and people. Then it was art, now it is technology. Fifteenth century ago, Tuscany broke down the barriers between people and places – and this continues today in Silicon Valley, the only place in the world right now where there are no limits and everything is possible.

Moreover, the greatest achievements of Italian thinkers and companies have always come when they looked outward: medieval traders, Renaissance artists, the Futurists and of course the post-war boom. Faced with this fact, it is hard to understand why in the last twenty years the trend has been reversed and the paradigm has turned on its head. Despite a few major exceptions, it seems like, in recent decades, the mental – even more so than the economic – boundaries of the Italian people have become ever narrower, contrary to what was happening in the rest of the world, but above all at odds with the fundamentals of Italian tradition. That is why, right from day one, I wanted YOOX to look overseas, distributing throughout Europe and communicating from the outset in both Italian and English. Thanks to this vision, we received our first orders from the Netherlands, which meant we could go into the second round of investment in better shape. If YOOX had not gained that support from abroad, if we had not pushed the boundaries of our Italian world, I would not be here writing this today. Now, we have three million active customers, everywhere from Japan to Arkansas. That is the reason for our success: moving the boundaries and joining the dots, bringing together a possible universe of customers with the creativity of the best designers from around the world.

Some people now say that pushing boundaries means losing your identity. That is not true – and the facts prove it. Rather, expanding our boundaries means going around the world, sharing the best of Italian traditions. But there's more. I firmly believe that expanding our boundaries will protect our identity by allowing us to maximise our competitive advantage, which above all is a better imagination, a better spirit, vision and attitude. And what does this mean if not the ability to look beyond our borders, pushing our limits and boundaries? This is the true meaning of 'Made in Italy' – and it is something we must understand before we can build upon it. At its core, but also in day-to-day practice, 'Made in Italy' is a brand that guarantees throughout the world that the best things are, indeed, made in Italy.

I have no doubt that what I have achieved in my life is because I have travelled a lot, especially when I was very young. I have a six-year-old daughter and I want to pass this on to her, because above all, travel teaches you to open up the boundaries in your own mind. You can only get to know the "other" in their own habitat; otherwise, it is like going to the zoo. My daughter is half-English and it pains me that she will live in a time when London is no longer a part of Europe. Especially when you think that only two years ago I oversaw the first and only Italy-UK cross-border merger between two fashion e-tailers, YOOX and NET-A-PORTER!

I shall continue to push boundaries, to test the limits and mix up experiences within YNAP as well, where I encourage employees to try out different roles and fields, and to keep moving forward. Could that be because, while I am seen as a businessman, I think of myself first and foremost as a creative and I never know where to set my own limits?